

The Lord Gave the Wordⁱ

A Study in the History of the Biblical Text

An Adapted Extract by Dr. Charles Keen

In this article we shall trace the history of the Old Testament from its origin in divine self-revelation, through its embodiment in written form by supernatural inspiration, to its accurate transmission to this present age by providential preservation.

The Old Testament

The greater part of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew; a number of scholars believe that this old Hebrew predated Abraham and that it was the “one language” and “one speech” of pre-Babel times (Genesis 11:1). They believe it was the original language of man.

It is an indisputable fact that practically the whole of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. The only exceptions are in Aramaic. These exceptions are two parts of the book of Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26); a verse in Jeremiah (10:11); and quite a large section of the book of Daniel (2:4 to 7:28).

Through general and special revelation (which climaxed, of course, in the Incarnation), God has graciously given to us a divine self-disclosure and made known the way of His salvation. Inspiration is the *process* by which God exerts a supernatural influence upon certain men, enabling them accurately and infallibly to record whatever has been revealed. “Holy men of God,” we read, “spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21). The *result* of the process is the written Word of God.

The first recorded example of such writing is found in Exodus 17:14. “Write this *for* a memorial in a book...” Again, in Exodus 24:4, “Moses wrote all the words of the LORD.” Yet again, in Exodus 34:27, “Write thou these words...”

Once written, the inspired originals, or “autographs,” were most carefully preserved. We read in Deuteronomy 31:25, 26 that “Moses

commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, Take this book of the law [the book which he had written] and put it in [or, by] the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee” (cf. Joshua 1:8; 1 Kings 2:3; Nehemiah 8:1).

Joshua came after Moses, the author of the book which bears his name. It was not long before there was a further addition, this time by Samuel, who “told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote *it* in a book, and laid *it* up before the LORD”. God continued to inspire men until there was a wonderful collection of books (1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29, 12:15; Isaiah 30:8; Jeremiah 36:1, 2).

The first time copying is mentioned is with respect to the Ten Commandments, originally written of course on tablets of stone by the finger of God. Those first tablets having been broken, the Lord commanded Moses to chisel out new tablets and the Lord wrote on them the same words. It was then that God laid down the rule for copying: the copy must be “according to the first writing” (Deuteronomy 10:4). When Jeremiah’s written message was destroyed by King Jehoiakim, God told the prophet to make another copy but, in doing so, he stipulated that it had to be an exact copy. “Take thee again another roll”, he said, “and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll” (Jeremiah 36:28). Accordingly, Baruch (Jeremiah’s scribe) rewrote, under the prophet’s dictation, all the words which had been written on the former scroll (36:32 – the second scroll was therefore an accurate copy of the first, even though on this occasion Baruch added further material from Jeremiah’s inspired ministry).

So copies were made, not only of the Ten Commandments but also of other parts of Scripture. A copy of the book of Deuteronomy, or perhaps even the whole Pentateuch, was to be in the hands of every king of Israel. “He shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of *that which is* before the priests the Levites: and it shall be with him and he shall read therein all the days of his life” (Deuteronomy 17:18; cf. 2 Chronicles 23:11).

Originals, as we have already observed, are called “autographs”. Copies are known as “apographs”. At first, the priests were responsible for

this copying (Deuteronomy 17:18). Understandably, the demand for copies of the Scriptures became very great.

It is worthy of note just here that, in the purpose and providence of God, the Jews took greater care of their sacred writings than any other people in the ancient world.

Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. The city suffered dreadful damage and the great temple built by Solomon was completely destroyed (2 Chronicles 36:17-19). It is almost certain that the original writings perished along with the city. However, all was not lost. By that time numerous copies had been made and some of these were taken into the land of captivity; for we find Daniel quoting from what must have been a copy of Moses' Law (Daniel 9:11) and also making mention of Jeremiah's prophecy, a copy of which must also have been in his possession (9:2).

In 537 BC, the Jews began to return from their captivity and we know that Ezra re-established worship in Jerusalem "as it is written in the book of Moses" (Ezra 6:18). According to Nehemiah 8:1, the people actually requested Ezra to bring "the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel". This was not the original – only a copy – yet it is significantly described as "the law of Moses".

By the time our Lord came on the scene, many reliable copies were available. The Lord Jesus constantly appealed to the sacred Scriptures. There can be no doubt that He regarded the extant copies as the very Word of God. Although He corrected Pharisaical interpretations and glosses, *never once did He call into question the integrity of the Hebrew text.* He was able to say, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10) and, again, "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The same applies, of course, to the Apostles (Acts 1:16, 4:25, 28:25; Hebrews 1:1, 6, 7; etc.).

The endorsement given by our Lord and His apostles to the first-century Hebrew text shows that text to have been both accurate and reliable.

As we have seen, God raised up scribes to produce a remarkably pure text. It fell to others to continue their work and take the necessary steps for the text's preservation. These were the Massoretes. They were families of

Jewish scholars and textual critics who eventually opened academies at Tiberias and another in Babylon.

Jerusalem had been destroyed in AD 70. The Massoretes knew that these dispersed Jews and their succeeding generations would require copies of the Holy Scriptures and they believed that certain things could be done to ensure the preservation of the pure Hebrew text.

They introduced vowel-points (Hebrew has no vowels), fixed accents (to ensure correct pronunciation), explained the meaning of words (where ambiguity existed), supplied marginal readings (to remove obscurity), and marked intended pauses (which often affect the meaning). So meticulous were they in their studies that they even counted the verses, words, and letters of the Old Testament.

Copyists had to follow the Talmud's strict rules, which included the following: only the skins of clean animals were to be used; each skin must contain the same number of columns; there were to be no less than forty-eight and no more than sixty lines; black ink was to be prepared according to a particular recipe; no word or letter was to be written from memory; if so much as a letter was omitted, or wrongly inserted, or even if one letter touched another, the sheet had to be destroyed; three mistakes on a page meant the whole manuscript was condemned; and revision of the copy had to take place within 30 days, for otherwise it had to be rejected. A manuscript surviving this process could hardly be anything but amazingly accurate.

The Massoretes' purpose was to preserve the Old Testament from every kind of alteration; and it was to secure that objective that they made their collection of detailed notes (the Massorah). The text from which our Authorized Version was translated is called the Ben Chayyim Text (under whose editorship it was printed in 1524-5).

Through God's special providence, we are able confidently to say that in *the Hebrew Massoretic text* we have a text which is very close to the Hebrew Original.

Summing up, then, what were the means God used to ensure the preservation of His Word? The *first* was the Jew's profound reverence for the Holy Scriptures. *Second*, there were the solemn commands of the Scriptures, such as Deuteronomy 4:2. *Third*, these scrolls were laid up in the Holy of Holies. *Fourth*, the sheer professionalism of the scribes and Massoretes secured and preserved a pure text. *Fifth*, there was the oversight of prophets. *Sixth*, the Jews constantly repeated their Scriptures. *Seventh*, Christ and His apostles confirmed the Scriptures as they were received in their times. God has *preserved* His Word. "God who gave the Scriptures, who works all things after the counsel of His will, has exercised a remarkable care over His Word, has preserved it in all ages in a state of essential purity, and has enabled it to accomplish the purpose for which he gave it".ⁱⁱ

The Hebrew text, then, was originally given by Moses and the prophets; it was faithfully copied by the scribes, standardized by Ezra along with the Men of the Great Synagogue, endorsed by our Lord and His apostles, and edited with meticulous care by the Massoretes. Orthodoxy requires that we boldly affirm our faith in the Old Testament as translated from the Hebrew Massoretic text.

For the full unedited article dealing with the whole Biblical text, please go to www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org.

ⁱ Excerpts taken from Malcom H. Watts, *The Lord gave the Lord: A Study in the History of the Biblical Text* (London, England: The Trinitarian Bible Society, 1998), pp. 1-12.

ⁱⁱ John H. Skilton, "The Transmission of the Scriptures," in *The Infallible Word, a Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, third revised printing (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), p. 143.